

# Responding to the impact of bushfires on children

## Fact sheet

South Australia has experienced severe bushfires recently. This, coupled with the extensive media coverage, may cause distress to your child.

Typically, symptoms of distress may present at different times and in many ways following a traumatic event and may be triggered by different stimuli. On a more positive note, with reassurance, and age-appropriate explanations that help the child understand the situation, the symptoms may also settle reasonably quickly.

**The following are some commonly displayed behaviours that are observed in pre-school aged children after a traumatic experience:**

- Sleep disturbance and/or anxious attachment to parents
- Regression of behaviour and/or withdrawal
- Re-enactment of the trauma
- Emotional changes and physical/health changes.

**In addition to the above list, primary school- age children may also exhibit these symptoms following a trauma:**

- Difficulty concentrating and problem-solving
- Lowered school performance and other school difficulties
- Over alertness and hyper vigilance (on the look-out for danger)
- Social difficulties and/or negative self-talk
- Physical symptoms (stomach aches, headaches, tiredness, etc.).

**In adolescents, the changes noticed following a trauma might look quite different, including:**

- Acting older than their age
- Acting out and/or risk taking
- Anger, hostility, belligerence and/or anxious, fearful, and worried
- Apathetic, withdrawn and/or self-critical
- Confused, sad and possibly depressed
- A sense of guilt
- Being able to talk in a matter-of-fact manner about the events without any appropriate emotions

It is important to consider that the above list will not represent all of the symptoms that a child/adolescent may experience in the event of a trauma. It is also important to note that some young people will not experience any significant distress at all, while others may show a few or many of the above symptoms.

These symptoms are understandable reactions to trauma and do not immediately indicate an inability to cope or a deeper psychological issue. Many of these symptoms will settle with time and support.



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### How you can help your child

Age-appropriate explanations of events are important for all children. Children can easily conjure up their own explanations or understandings for situations when not given information, which could be far more frightening than the reality.

Allow children to express their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of situations. It will give you some insight into how they are 'processing' the event, and the opportunity to correct inaccurate beliefs.

Be mindful of your own response to the trauma. Children are acutely attuned to their parents' emotional states. If you are overly fearful or anxious, it will be very difficult for you to reassure your child that they and you are safe.

Further information regarding bushfires and children can be found [here](#).

If you remain concerned about your child's response to the current bushfires, please consider the option of contacting the CAMHS Connect Team (Triage Service) on 1300 2 CAMHS (1300 222 647).